

Engineers volunteer at local elementary school

Cheryl Rodewig
The Bayonet

SPC Erik Anderson has trouble walking down the halls of Wynnton Elementary School without groups of children crowding him, slowing his walk with hugs and high fives. A Soldier in the 11th Engineer Battalion, Anderson visits the school every Wednesday to eat breakfast with the children and tutor third-graders, part of his commitment to the Partners in Education program.

“That’s pretty much the highlight of my week — to see the kids faces light up and see them saluting me and smiling,” said Anderson, who began helping out in September. “When they said they needed volunteers for this, I was one of the first ones to raise my hand. You never get enough of working with kids and brightening their day. They brighten yours.”

Nine-year-old Kayla Hall said she has enjoyed getting to know Anderson over the past several weeks, especially since he helps her in math.

“Getting this type of help is kind of hard to find,” she said. “It’s like we’re going a step farther in what we’re supposed to be doing in third grade, so we can get ready for fourth grade.”

Kayla said Anderson is “more special” because he’s in the military and takes time to talk with her.

“They really confide in me,” Anderson said. “I ask about their schoolwork, their weekend. They tell me about their birthdays, their parties, how things are at home. It’s not just the math thing.

Before I talk to them about math, I ask how they’ve been doing and make sure nothing’s wrong.”

The 11th Engineer Battalion started its partnership with Wynnton two years ago. They provide support for events throughout the school year and mentor individual students.

“It has just been absolutely fantastic,” said Nancy Johnson, the school principal. “The men and women of the 11th (Engineer Battalion) are wonderful. We love having them here. They are polite; they are respectful. They just epitomize what we want our kids to be. And the kids are crazy about them.”

Johnson said she sees evidence of the volunteers' influence every day.

"Third-graders who knew only their ones times tables and had been on the ones for months and months began to show steady progress in learning them, because they're working one on one with their tutor," she said. "And they develop a close relationship. They're role models for the kids. Our children look up to these men and women."

The battalion also started the Leadership Academy, an eight-week course for fifth-grade boys led by 2LT David Hamilton that covers one Army core value every class.

"We (discuss) what the word means, what it means to the kids, what it means to me and how it has helped in my life," Hamilton said. "We don't push the Army. It's just to see how the kids relate to things and see what kind of common ground we have. You get some surprising and interesting answers from kids and find out what's important to them and how they're thinking ... which is often hilarious."

The focus of the class is building moral character and strong leaders, Hamilton said.

"If they foster things like that then no matter where they go in the private sector and civilian life, they can be better people, and that's what we want," he said.

Even at the elementary school level, children aren't too young to make decisions that will affect them as an adult, Anderson said.

"It's the time in their life where these decisions may not seem like they matter, but decisions they're making right now are going to carry on for the rest of their lives," he said. "All I tell them is make good grades, come to school, obey your mom and dad, and next thing you know, you're 18 years old and you're gone. Life goes by fast, so make the most of it now, in a good way."

That's why volunteering with children really matters, Anderson said.

"I love working with kids. That's the future of our nation," he said. "If you can give them a positive outlook right now, you have to take advantage of that."